

United Nations Human Rights Council, 37th Session (26th February - 23rd March 2018)

Item 4 - General Debate

March 2018

Speaker: Humanists UK¹ representative, Dr David Harvey

Mr President, across the globe, access to safe, legal abortions remains non-existent or limited for millions of women, threatening their health, their lives, and their rights to privacy, to family life, and to effective remedy, under the ICCPR.² Between 2010 and 2014, the World Health Organisation estimates that as many as 25 million unsafe abortions took place worldwide.³ These unsafe abortions account for as many as 13% of maternal deaths worldwide each year.⁴

In the Republic of Ireland, a referendum will be held in May to decide whether to abolish the Eighth Amendment to its constitution, which currently prohibits abortion on nearly all grounds, even in cases of rape, incest, and fatal foetal abnormality. One Irish woman who was recently forced to travel to Britain for a termination, died on the flight back following a complication.⁵ In Northern Ireland, too, abortion remains illegal in almost all instances, leading to 'grave', 'systemic' violations of women's rights according to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.⁶ Humanists UK and the UNHRC itself are currently seeking to reform Northern Ireland's abortion law at the Supreme Court, in a case focusing on abortion in the cases of rape, incest, and foetal abnormality.

In other parts of the world, even being *seen* to be breaching abortion laws can lead to extremely severe punishment. In El Salvador, for instance, Teodora Vásquez was released from prison on 15th February this year having served 10 years of a 30 year sentence for aggravated murder after suffering a stillbirth.⁷ This is cruel, senseless, gender-based violence, and it must end.

We recommend strongly that the Council supports efforts to enable women to access safe, legal abortions across the globe and continues to challenge restrictive abortion laws wherever they are found.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK recently changed its name from the British Humanist Association

² For example, see:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20077>

³ World Health Organisation Report, 27th September 2017

[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(17\)31794-4/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)31794-4/fulltext)

⁴ <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs388/en/>

⁵ <http://www.thejournal.ie/fergal-malone-abortion-flight-death-3642355-Oct2017/>

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<https://humanism.org.uk/2018/02/23/northern-ireland-abortion-law-breaches-womens-rights-says-un/>

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-43073424>